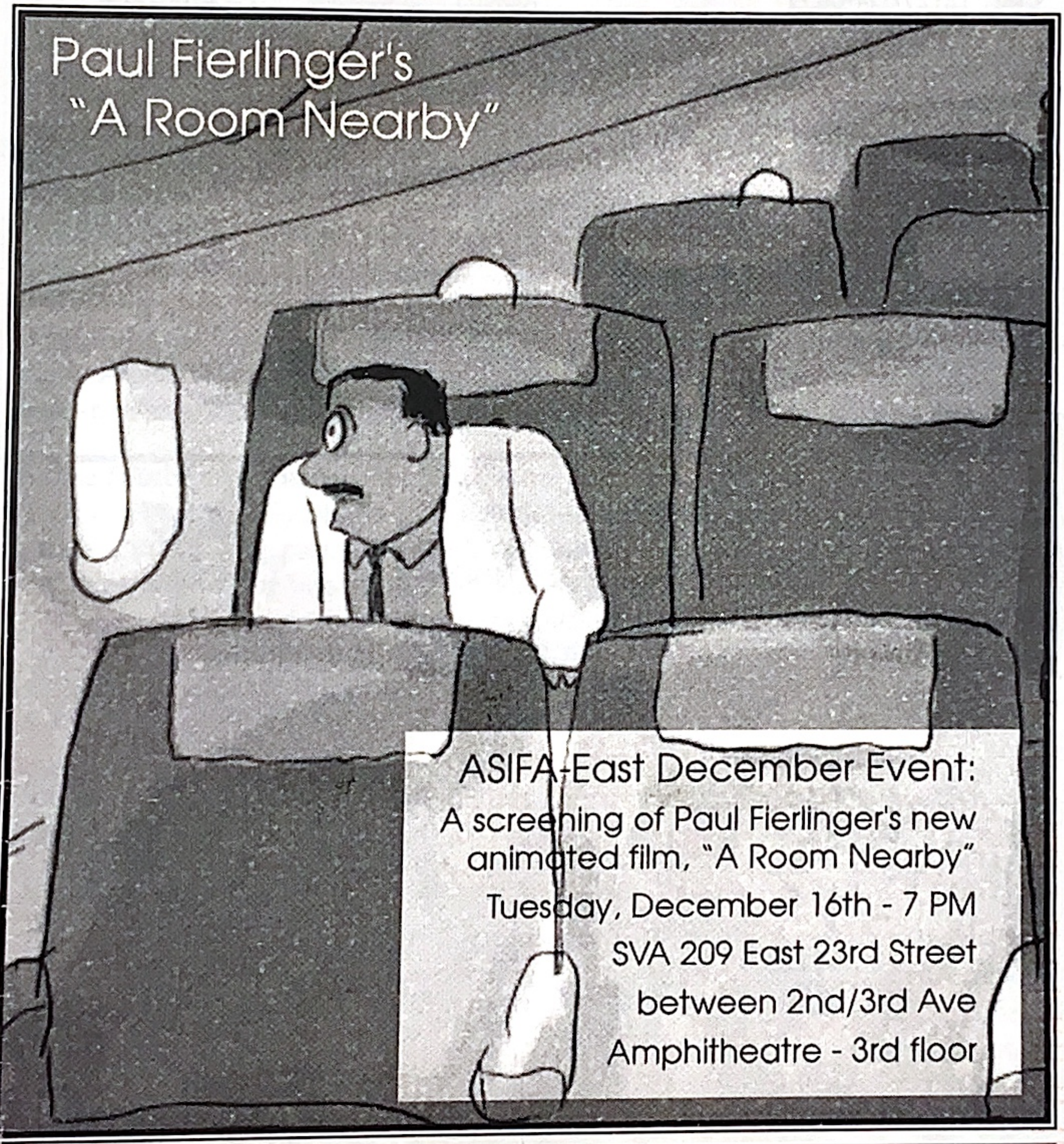
ASIFA EAST • The International Animated Film Society

aNYmator

December 2003


Paul Fierlinger's
"A Room Nearby"
ASIFA-East December Event:
A screening of Paul Fierlinger's new animated film, "A Room Nearby"
Tuesday, December 16th - 7 PM
SVA 209 East 23rd Street
between 2nd/3rd Ave
Amphitheatre - 3rd floor

Also Inside

- The Triplets of Belleville
- 2-D Lives!!!
- The Films Of Michael Sporn

ASIFA East

The International Animated Film Society Northeast /New York Chapter

A Program of the New York Foundation For The Arts

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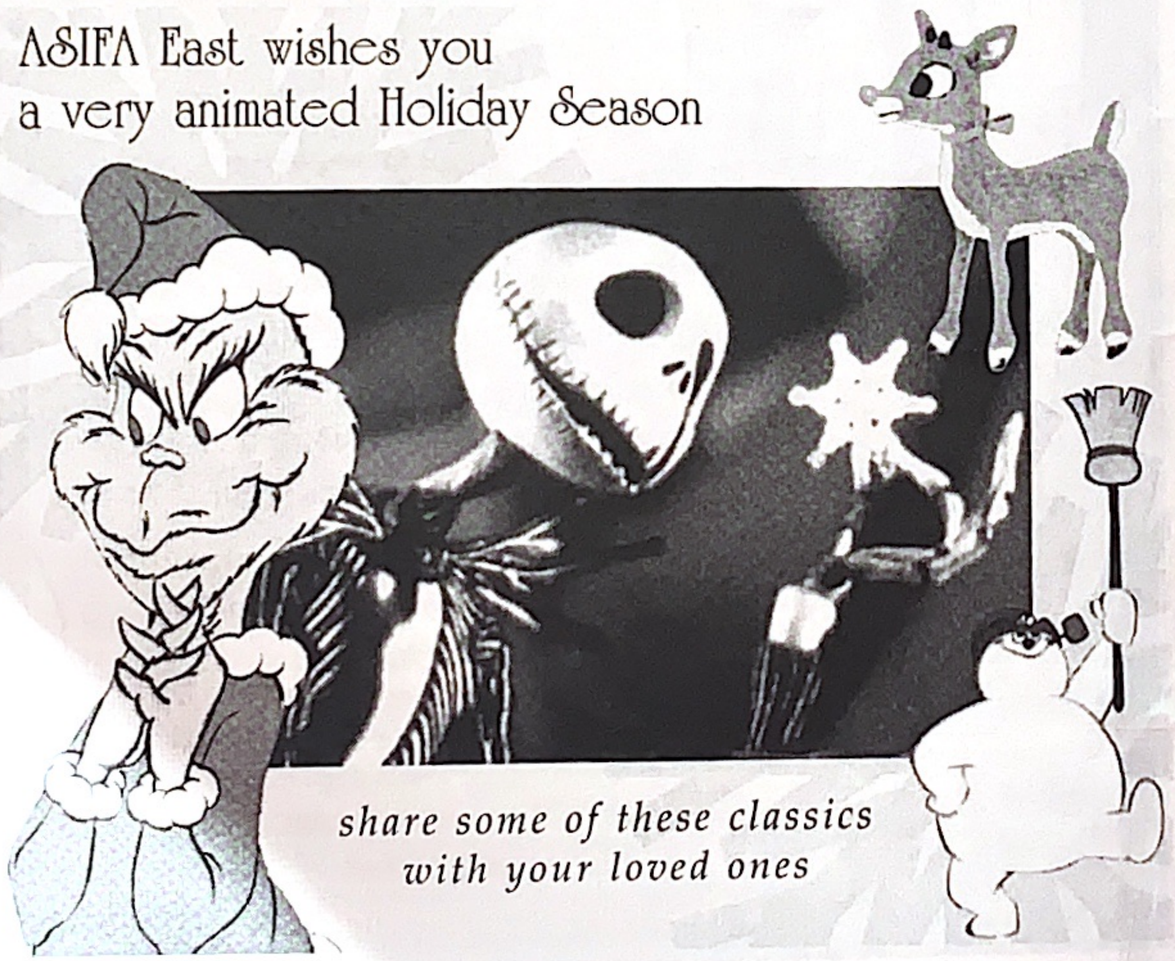


Animation Innovation

In the 1972 live-action film The Heartbreak Kid, Charles Grodin knows no limits in his pursuit of his prize, Cybill Shepherd. He chases her with a determination that is missing everywhere else in his life. As someone wise once said, the chase is the thing. When Grodin finally gets his girl, things get decidedly less interesting. The early development of the principals of animation at the Disney studio could be called "their chase period". They were chasing down convincing acting/drama/staging/ weight/effects and more. The films made at the Disney studio between 1928 and 1942 amply display the chase and what followed in the years to come could be seen as their prize. Yet, isn't it infinitely more interesting to watch something grow? In the chase period you see the falls, misfires and first moments of magic. This gives early features Snow White, Pinocchio, Fantasia, Dumbo, and Bambi a kinetic quality that shows up in every frame. At any moment the whole film could unravel and the "trick" nature of animated films could render the whole experience laughable in all the wrong places- think Snow White's or Bambi's Mother death scenes or even more heart-renching Dumbo's visit to his incarcerated mother.

As the Disney artists honed their craft in the post World War 2 years, a much more realistic and formulaic animation approach won out. Animation innovation was largely a thing of the past. The burden of compelling filmmaking relied soley on the story elements falling into place, as they do in 101 Dalmations and as they don't in The Aristocats. What traces of pre-prize animation exist in the commerical arena today?

On television there is visual excitement in Ren and Stimpy, Spongebob and Teacher's Pet. These shows don't adhere to the ridgidity of a character model sheet. Don't get me wrong, this will not lead the artists so far astray as to draw Spongebob as Scooby Doo, but instead liberates them into letting the acting and plot points decide how to draw their characters. Spongebob ups the ante in making its main character a literal canvas on which to paint a seemingly unlimited number of faces. It is remarkable that such visual excitement should come from shows that ship all their animation to South Korea. Therefore, the creative flexibility displayed on shows like Spongebob must live in the layouts. This makes these shows true heirs to the genius that came out of such places as Termite Terrace (where the Warner shorts were created). There, directors like Chuck Jones would key out the storytelling moments of Bugs, Coyote and company, and the drawings would be passed on to the animator. The film lived in those drawings long before they were animated. These were visually exciting poses that used every bit of acting they could wring out of their characters.

Happily, the "chase" lives on most directly and consistently in the hands of independent animators the world over. As they learn and adapt the craft of those before them, innovation continues. May we never catch our Cybill Shepherds.

VIEW POINT AIEM

The Body's Still Moving

by Michael Sporn

Considering how frequently we've heard recently that 2D animation is dead, quite a few interesting films are just opening in theaters.

A week old is the *LOONEY TUNES* movie, with animation directed by Eric Goldberg. It'd be hard to tell from the ads or posters that Eric was involved;no animator's name appears on the marketing materials. The film is an attempt to do *SPACE JAM* right, combining 2D animation with 3D live action. Unfortunately, the characters were colored not too differently from the former film, with lots of cgi airbrush "to give the characters dimension". Isn't it odd that the most successful *WB* cartoons don't have this airbrush work in evidence? What were those animators of the 40's thinking? Undoubtedly, they were spending more time writing story. Something this feature could have used. Grosses seem to be lackluster. No surprise considering free *LOONEY TUNES* (the good ones) are running concurrently on *BOOMERANG*.

BROTHER BEAR is being touted as Disney's last 2D film. What will they say when *HOME ON THE RANGE* opens in another year? The studio has closed their LA 2D studio, their Japanese 2D studio and are about to finally close the Orlando 2D studio. Too bad. The BEAR film does have some very attractive moments, but the story is stupid. Financially, the film is doing well though not with *LION KING* or *SHREK* grosses. Though it will easily recoup it's investment.

Most interesting is *THE TRIPLETTES OF BELLEVILLE*, a French/Canadian co-production with a French writer/director at the helm. The film has pounds of imagination on display with some fine animation and very good design. The story for the first 2/3 of the film is captivating; it does fall short in the end. The film is clever and funny, attractive and artful. Certainly it's my favorite for Best Animation Feature Oscar, but it doesn't have a chance of winning.

The only computer made film of the year, *FINDING NEMO*, is sure to win all the prizes this year. It's a snappy film with excellent voice work and lots of money behind it. The DVD was just released so that voters won't forget it.

If all the computer-animated films were made as well as *PIXAR*'s work, I wouldn't feel so slighted by the indignities unknowledgeable critics are throwing at 2D folk. Unfortunately, most of the work is shabby or even downright ugly. The movement is generally reconstituted human movement – using motion capture programs (see *THE HULK* or *MTV*'s *SPIDERMAN*) or just badly done floating-movement – not unlike the motion marionettes might have (see *SHREK*).

To see some old-fahioned 2D artistry on display, come to John Canemaker's talk about Mary Blair and her Disney designs at MOMA's Gramercy Theater on Dec. 5th. *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* will be screened in conjunction with the talk.

Advice From Filmmakers'

It's The Story, Stupid.

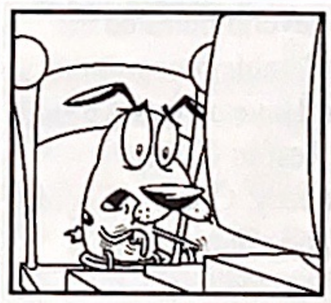
by Ken Kerbs

One thing I've realized over the last few years when watching cartoons with my children, is that one of my film professor's favorite lines is true, has been true and probably will forever be true: "It's the story, stupid!" Ralph would say in editing class. And Ralph Rosenblum knew best. He edited Woody Allen's first 10 films (including "Annie Hall") and classics like "A Thousand Clowns," "The Pawnbroker," and "The Producers." It's never a question of how realistic the animation is when considering the success of the film, or it's great music score, but whether the story works.

So what makes a story –a narrative screenplay or cinema verité documentary, animation, old-time black and white silent flick, or modern day gazillion dollar picture – successful. If I had to choose the most important attribute, it would be the way the characters interact, their actions, behaviors, and "realness," and how, scene-by-scene, there is a natural progression through obstacles, twists and turns, and a gradual process of learning, which culminates in some kind of revelation and resolution. It's the great payoff. Without it, that feeling of satisfaction while sitting in that dark theater with light bouncing off the screen would be void and null. A dud. Bland. A huge waste of time and money. If, however, in the end, it all makes sense (to at least 50% of the audience) where, after a series of little surprises (think "Jaws" when every 10 minutes you're on the edge of your seat, and then, WHAM, you sit back and it begins all over again) the film manages to transcend the materialistic world of the theater, your date, the sticky floor, and you are "IN" the film, [breathe] and the story gets under your skin and has a real physiological effect on your psyche, well then, I think we're onto something.

One hundred and ten years ago B.F. (before film) and even all the way back into the caves, people told stories the old fashioned way—using objects, still images, shadow puppets projected by the light of lanterns, paintings on a wall. The really good artists knew that withholding information as the story progressed created an event that captivated the audience and kept them involved. Those who couldn't sold fruit and vegetables at the market.

Ken Kerbs is president of TwinVision Productions in NYC which produces, shoots and edits corporate videos and documentaries. He received his MFA in documentary filmmaking from Columbia University in '96. He has taught video production to young people at the high school and college level. He can be reached at ken@twinvis.com.



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Getting to know Paul Fierlinger

Paul Fierlinger was born March 15th, 1936 in Ashiya Japan where his parents were Czechoslovak career diplomats. Fierlinger spent the WWII years in the United States and at the age of twelve, while living in a boarding school in Podebrady, Czechoslovakia, Fierlinger created his first animated film by shooting drawings from his flipbook with a 16mm Bolex. In 1955 he graduated from the Bechyne School of Applied Arts. After two years of military service he free-lanced in Prague as a book illustrator and gag cartoonist for cultural periodicals under the pen name Fala.

Fierlinger established himself in 1958 as Czechoslovakia's first independent producer of animated films, providing 16mm films from his home studio for Prague TV and the 16mm division of Kratky Film. Thus, he created approximately 200 films, ranging from 10-second station breaks to 10-minute theatrical releases and TV children's shorts.

In 1967 Fierlinger escaped from Czechoslovakia to Holland where he pitched for a number of station breaks for Dutch television in Hilversum. He then went to Paris to work for a short stint as a spot animator for Radio Television France and ended up in Munich for half a year having been offered the job of key animator on a feature film at Linda Films (The Conference of the Animals). In Munich, prior to his departure to the U.S., he married a Czechoslovak compatriot and photographer, Helena Strakova.

He arrived in the United States in 1968 where he first worked for Universal Pictures as a documentary director (Prague, The Summer of Tanks). For a short period the Fierlingers moved to Burlington Vermont to work for a local TV station and there, a first son, Philip was born. In 1969 Fierlinger settled in Philadelphia where he was hired by Concept Films to animate political commercials for Hubert Humphrey and other political candidates. In 1971 Peter, a second son was born.

AR&T Associates, inc., his own animation house, was formed by Fierlinger in 1971, initially to produce animated segments for ABC's Harry Reasoner Specials and PBS' Sesame Street, including the popular Teeny Little Super Guy series, which runs to this day.

Since 1971, AR&T has produced over 700 films, of which several hundred are television commercials. Many of these films received considerable recognition including an Academy Award nomination for It's so Nice to Have a Wolf Around the House. Other awards include Cine Golden Eagles, and Best in Category Awards at festivals in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Annecy, Ottawa, Zagreb, Milan, Melbourne, Prague, London, and many other cities and countries, well over a hundred all together.

And Then I'll Stop . . ., a 1989 film on drug and alcohol abuse has received more awards than any other film of his, including First Prize in Aspen, Colorado and was selected for screening at MOMA's New Films, New Directors series and the London Royal Film Festival. At that time, Paul and Helena were divorced and their two young adult sons moved to San Francisco to pursue their own careers in computer and multi media productions.

Fierlinger became a steady provider of many TV commercials and sales films for US HEALTHCARE, winning a variety of international awards. At this time he met and married Sandra Schuette, a fine arts painter (the Boston Museum of Art School and Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts). Together they developed a small series of intersticials for Nickelodeon called Amby & Dexter, a Sesame Street series called Alice Kadeezenberry, and a twenty-minute film of children's songs for The Children's Book of the Month Club, called Playtime.

In 1993 Fierlinger received a contract from PBS' American Playhouse to create a one-hour autobiography, called Drawn from Memory. This was completed and premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1995 and has since been nationally televised throughout the world. Drawn from Memory has received several major film festival awards, including a presentation by invitation at INPUT 96 in Guadalajara, Mexico. Based on the success of this film, ITVS of PBS contracted Fierlinger to create a half-hour, Corporation for Public Broadcasting special called Still Life with Animated Dogs. This film, about dogs and other things of a divine nature, has a completion date of September 2000.

At the end of 1999, with the gracious permission of ITVS, the production of Still Life with Animated Dogs had to be interrupted for several months so that the Fierlingers could develop and begin the production of an animation series for cable TV's new channel for women, Oxygen. Named Drawn from Life, the two-minute films, which feature the voices and simple stories of real life women, can now be seen on Oxygen several times a day.

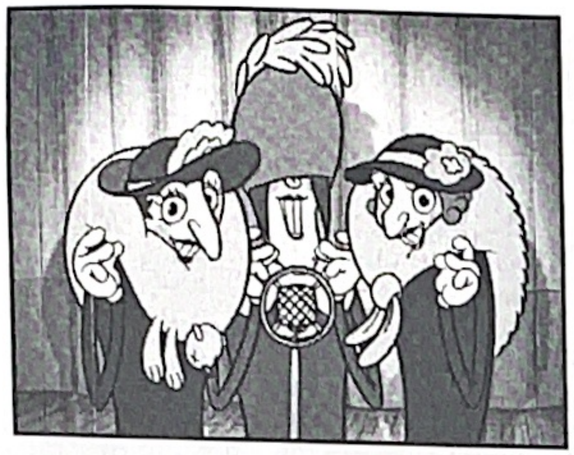
Paul and Sandra Fierlinger currently live and work out of their home studio in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Their 16mm film equipment has now been entirely replaced by networked computer workstations, but the medium of Paul's drawings remains pencil on paper.

Bill Plympton Screening Down Under

A program of 12 short films by Bill Plympton will be screened at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, Australia, on December 18 and 20 as part of their "Masters of Animation" program. Included in the line-up will be Bill's classic shorts "Your Face", "How to Kiss", "One of Those Days", "25 Ways to Quit Smoking" and "Nosehair", along with more recent favorites "Sex & Violence" and "Can't Drag Race With Jesus".

For more info: *http://www.acmi.net.au/*

For more Plympton appearances and screenings, please go to:
http://www.awn.com/plympton/appearances.html



The Triplets of Belleville

by Trevor Woolley

Let me start by saying this, The Triplet's of Belleville might not end up being one of your favorite animated films of the last couple of years, but it will end up making your list as one of the most important ones. Most of us saw this one coming from a mile away when the trailers hit several months ago. You could tell by the look and the feel of the thing that this was new ground. However, I don't think any of us were quite prepared for what we saw. It's a film that goes beyond it's hyper dynamic perspectives, it's exquisite character design, and it's holier-than-thou animation (even though it has all three in spades) to create a unique cinematic experience that's greater than the sum of its parts. It tells the story of a melancholy orphaned boy named Champion who (under the guidance of his guardian grandmother) finds a passion and future in bicycle racing. On the day of his big debut in the Tour de France however, he is kidnapped by the French Mafia and wisked away to Belleville (a thinly guised metaphor of New York) for the benefit of their own fiendish plans. And (are you ready for this?) it tells this story for ninety minutes without dialogue.

This film comes roaring out of the gate and provides pure cinematic joy for about the first forty minutes. Everything works. The music is perfect, the animation is jaw dropping, the design and direction on the film are cutting edge, and the storytelling is sharp and imaginative. Even the characters are incredibly well rounded and obtainable due largely to excellent acting in the pencils and what I can only describe as perfection in the timing. The weight and dynamics of the characters are as good as you will ever see in animation and again, the incredible art direction will leave you feeling like you're really sharing something fresh and meaningful with everyone else in that darkened theater. Personally, I couldn't help but feel I was in a classroom getting a lesson in force and design that was as intimidating in it's reserve as it was in its lushness.

What happens next? Well, it's hard to say, but around the midpoint of the film there is a noticeable change in texture. I believe this film will have a bit of trouble finding champions in this market, as the pacing will most likely be lost on American Audiences. It becomes decidedly more intimate and takes to focusing on, and expanding at great lengths, smaller moments in time. The character development stops completely, and in the case of Champion, actually manages to deteriorate into a sort of nothingness that leaves the audience hollow for the kid they had been previously rooting for. As the film culminates into it's strangely anticlimactic closer (I say strangely because it ends in a big Hollywood car chase and shoot out) most of the audience will have shrugged their shoulders of any responsibility they felt for the characters and will be simply feasting on the eye candy. I don't know if it's fair to say that the film losses its momentum, but it does flatten out. Once the development stops it's easy to become passive to a point where you feel like you're coasting to the end of the film.

So what do you take away from it? Animation, animation, and yep, you guessed it, animation - but in this case you're also going to leave with a renewed passion for perspective and design. There's some incredibly thoughtful humor, some amazing cinematic drama (be prepared for the sequence on the ocean), and glorious pencil work still visible in everything the artist's hands touched. The music is inspired (made flawless through it's delivery by the three sisters of Belleville) and there's not an industry person out there that won't be smiling through the opening homage. There is also a wonderful authorship to this film as well. It's not every day we get to feast on such a different perspective, least of all one with such a distaste for Americans. I highly recommend this piece, you may not end up liking it, but I truly believe that everyone will end up needing it.

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THE FILMS OF MICHAEL SPORN

By Richard Gorey

Recently, four films by Michael Sporn were released on DVD, and I had a chance to hear Sporn talk about how they were created at an ASIFA event to celebrate the DVD's release.

The event came at an interesting period in my artistic career. It seemed as if I had come back into animation when the business was faltering and very unsure of the direction it would take in the future. I remember when I was young, wanting to be the next Ray Harryhausen. Now I realize there will NEVER be "a next Ray Harryhausen" for several reasons. Technology has exploded since I went to college, twenty-two years ago. Films that were once created by a few are now created by teams of hundreds. And they look so different than they used to: sleek, sophisticated, and sometimes, a little cold.

There was some debate (and controversy) at the discussion panel for Allan Neuwirth's book Makin' Toons recently. I sensed fear in the air: fear about the economy, the future of traditional animation, and, (to my way of thinking) not much charitable opinion about current traditionally animated films like 'Sinbad', which I really admired for several reasons. It seems as if even ANIMATORS don't like animation anymore. Maybe they're discouraged by the scarcity of work. Maybe they're intimidated by the ultra glossy, hi-tech CGI films that have become so popular in recent years. And ya know, maybe they're just really disconnected from what makes a film a good film in the first place.

Whatever the case, I witnessed a lot of this negativity and critical mindset as that panel discussion unfolded. Kudos to Allan for bringing these feelings to light that evening, and I hope the debate about trends will serve the industry instead of dividing people.

Those looking for inspiration, and for the elemental artistry that defines animation might do well to look at the four films Michael Sporn has just released through First Run Features. I think these works are required viewing for any independent animator out there who believes every film needs to look like 'Finding Nemo'.

Years ago, as a young animator, I was much impressed with Sporn's 'Dr. DeSoto', a charmer about a mouse dentist who must pull the tooth of a fox. It was a revelation to me: that, working with a very small crew, one could create an experience for an audience that in some way duplicated the experience I previously got only from the Disney features. There was humor, story, suspense, an appealing visual world, and sharp writing-- all in ten or eleven minutes. 'Dr. DeSoto' looked like a film that had been created by individuals, instead of a committee.

The new DVDs just released contain four films of similar merits, but vastly different sensibilities. Sporn's "style" if there is one (I feel he works well in several different visual arenas) is somehow whimsical, somehow urban, usually sardonic, and always thoughtful. You look at his cartoons and you see all the principles of animation you'd see in a feature film. There's excellent voice work, (often by "name brand" stars, though not exclusively) a strong story, appealing characters, a graphic style that has been carefully chosen to suit the material, and a brilliant use psychologically of color. Sporn may be proudest of 'The Hunting of the Snark', a haunting, oddly disturbing film based on the famous Lewis Carroll poem. He speaks of an 8mm version produced when he was a teenager (I'd love to see that film) and the extended version on DVD is an elaborate visual expression of something that, for many people, will always be an abstraction. Sporn doesn't attempt to "explain" what the Snark is: he seems unconcerned with untangling Carroll's dense layers of symbolism or subtext. What seems to have fascinated Sporn was the visualizing of something broad and epic. I believe it's the closest thing Michael has ever done to creating a personal version of the films he was inspired by, like 'Sleeping Beauty'. Though the film's resolution is open to interpretation, it does have a beginning, a middle, and a end. Its theme is the epic quest, and its visuals are designed and executed to convey a sense of something grand and spectacular. James Earl Jones' narration lends weight and scope to the enterprise- and something of menace, as well- for all the film's humor, there is an oppressive air of dread that lurks on the edges of the frame; perhaps it's the chilling presence of the Snark, closing in on these characters. I loved Sporn's use of the color blue, especially powerful when he uses it against black. His designs of the island are at the same time fanciful and ominous. A shot suggestive of a rail road track (used several times, in different treatments) seems to me the film's most significant image; a Freudian trip through dark places, tunnels into the subconscious of his obsessed characters. One could argue that 'The Hunting of the Snark' is a film about mental illness- about obsessive-compulsive tendencies in those who hunt, and how those obsessions turn on us and destroy us, in the end. I won't claim that this was Sporn's intention, but for me, 'The Snark' is a very successful psychological horror film, whose snaking, winding, ever-changing images may be a depiction of the tortured psyche the poem references. A section midway into the film, in which the animation plays out on "twos" but the back-grounds dissolve and shift in cycles of "eights" conveys a dreamlike, stream-of-consciousness effect that characterizes the entire enterprise. The Snark itself may symbolize many things: success, respect, validation, achievement, power and glory. In "chasing" the Snark for the many years it took to produce this dizzyingly elaborate work, Sporn may have understood the nature of that obsession- and the quest undertaken by his delightfully twisted characters.

'Talking Eggs', a re-telling of an existing fable, has a delicate look, thanks largely to the elegant background treatments of Bridget Thorne. In the documentary, Sporn talks with enthusiasm about his decision to animate the film on textured brown paper, instead of traditional cels. This not only gave the film a very distinctive "children's book" look, but it helped the characters blend with their chalk pastel backgrounds in a way they might not have otherwise. You watch the animators coloring the characters on the documentaries , and there's a comforting, even refreshing sense of the connection one has to one's work. There's nary a computer effect in sight. The brown paper takes the Prismacolor pencil in a distinctive way; the camera records this delicate technique with pleasing fidelity. We see the lines

shift, alter, and BREATHE as the film progresses. It keeps the characters alive even when they're standing still. It's the power of good old-fashioned drawing.

The relationship between the young girl and the old woman she meets in an abandoned train yard serves as a substitute for the relationship the child wants to have with her mother, but cannot. Strong female characters are a recurring theme in Sporn's work. They appear in 'Champagne' and 'Whitewash' as well. Like the characters of establishes fairy tales, these powerful, often maternal figures enter the story to set things right, emotionally and physically. Even the character design shows thought and integrity: little Selena is told by her friend, "If you go around thinking everything is the way you think it should be, man, you're gonna be in for a lotta surprises!" The point is not to take things at face value, and we see Selena's glasses are cracked, dictating a distorted view of the world around her. Clever.

'Whitewash' was intriguing to me for several reasons. Like 'Champagne', it was a film about some truly terrible things, yet somehow it doesn't wallow in the trouble its characters face. We've all seen "socially conscious" animation done poorly, and it can be a trial, to be preached to and spoken down to. 'Whitewash' and 'Champagne' are startlingly adult films, in many ways. Both contain heavy subject matter, and both speak to very complex truths. Even stylistically, they are about as far from the Disney "look" as one can get. But if Sporn is not dealing with Disney sized budgets, he is certainly able to compete when it comes to storytelling mastery. His skill in choosing the best angles, the most effective framing, and the most eye-catching transitions makes for films that are straightforward on their surface, but subliminally are extremely complicated. A good Michael Sporn film is like a short education in visual storytelling.

Yet for all their emotional sophistication and technical assuredness, both 'Whitewash' and 'Champagne' have a narrative simplicity that makes them accessible to youngsters.

This accessibility, I believe, is the key to the appeal of Sporn's work. You look at these films, obviously not the product of thousands of hands- these short slices of life and humor and tragedy- and the dram of creating such a film seems within reach. Sporn is putting work out there that doesn't try to look like the multi-million dollar films produced in the last decade. His films are very intimate, always intensely personal, and usually the product of a very small staff, working with long-established techniques, shot on 35mm film, just like cartoons have been shot for decades.

Where the films 'Whitewash' and 'Champagne' really distinguish themselves is in their layered sensibilities and the depth behind their creation. Sporn is as sophisticated as anyone in the majors when it comes to building to an emotional climax, or manipulating his images and characters for a desired effect. In 'Whitewash', for instance, when Helene and her brother Sebastian are walking home from school, the backgrounds suddenly become a riot of discordant reds and blacks. Angry scratches mar the frame behind Helene, and the sky becomes heavy with menace, dread, and anger. We know- even before we see the gang of toughs who will victimize Helene- that something terrible is going to happen. Color and camera moves foreshadow it.During moments of intense emotion and conflict, Sporn often dispenses with backgrounds entirely: characters move and emote against fields of color, or space, or total darkness. The effect is stark and frightening. When we're the victim of a crime, or of violence, we feel alone. Sporn understands this, and finds several ways to isolate Helene as the film progresses. Unseen behind the door of her room, framed by a window (a noir touch) or placed into a corner of a busy frame, Helene's alienation is made both structurally and visually clear.

What I found most compelling in 'Whitewash', however, was the plight of Helene's brother, who at first is a cocky, smart-alecky little tough guy. When he and Helene are set upon by the thugs, Sebastian reacts as many children would: he runs away, and later in the film, he suffers the agonizing internal consequences of this. The film is as much about him as it is about Helene. That's just good writing, and I was impressed at how the film was able to explore this secondary story without losing its focus. One of the movie's strongest assets is its voice cast of youngsters, which gives 'Whitewash' an authenticity it might not have had had it been produced more slickly, for a major studio. In the end, the film doesn't attempt to explain the crime, or even punish the guilty parties, but its characters resolve their struggles by acknowledging their confusion and pain, then moving through and away from them. A thoughtful, open-ended resolution for a deceptively simple tale. It's the kind of thing Sporn does best. Bravo.

The most affecting film in the series, however, was the staggering 'Champagne', which is based on the experiences of a young girl who's had a terrible start to her life, but is bound and determined to rise above her circumstances.

Sometimes I wonder if it's difficult for someone like Michael to thrive without the backing of a major studio. Then I realized that the benefit of being Michael Sporn is the freedom to tell the stories HE wants to tell. He relates of how the young girl who became the subject of 'Champagne' toured his studio and suggested, "Why don't you make a movie about me?" and Sporn's response was, "Okay, I will." I wonder if he'd have had the freedom or the power to make this decision had he not been in business for himself. For all the struggles an independent animator must endure, moments like these must be a wonderful reminder of the value of staying small.

Thank goodness he did make the decision to dramatize this girl's story. 'Champagne' is one of his legitimate masterpieces- and one of the great recent independent animated films. It's heartbreaking and joyful at the same time, and is told with such visual bravado and skill that it becomes something more than the sum of its parts, when all is said and done. It's an artistic success that's also a great entertainment. Wisely choosing to use Champagne's own voice to tell her story, and cannily letting her "write her own script" by merely talking to an interviewer without being coached, Sporn manages to create a positive, life-affirming movie that could not possibly have been as effective as a live-action documentary. 'Champagne' revels in the fact that it is an animated film, and can do things a live version couldn't. The recreation of the crime Chanpagne's mother has been incarcerated for has the quality of nightmare and distortion one imagines a child might possess when trying to assimilate such dreadful information. I don't think this moment would have even been attempted in a live action film. It's an audacious touch- and a very disturbing one; Sporn has never shied away from images and situations that might make his audience uncomfortable.

Champagne's mother has been imprisoned for the murder of a man she claims was abusing her. Sporn hints that the crime has imprisoned Champagne herself- by using horizontal bars as a visual motif that runs throughout the film: in the wallpaper of Champagne's room, in the vertical lines of the home where she lives, in the bars of her crib, in the shadows cast across her face and body, and of course, in the scenes of the prison, where she visits her mother. Sporn indicates the girl's isolation with the effective use- and absence- of color. Champagne's sweater is red: often it is the only color in the frame. The color suggests her anger at her troubled younger years, but ironically, it is also a bold, joyful color when placed against hues that compliment it. Against black, red is angry and suggests pain: against the cloudy blue sky, it's radiant and happy, like Champagne herself. Sporn's use of color, and his understanding of it, is noteworthy. One needs to see his films several times to understand the complexity of his color theory and its effect on the audience. It could be argued that color is even more important in animation than in live action. At the very least, its more prevalent in animation, and therefore has more impact.

In many scenes, Champagne is isolated from others by her placement in the frame, by the absence of a background, or by the other characters actually moving away from her. Sometimes, in the middle of a sentence, the narrator will recall something very painful. Another director might cut here: Sporn merely dissolves the background away and remains with the character. The tone changes, but the audience's viewpoint does not. We stay with the character, and the technique, for all its cleverness, encourages us to remain in a position of identification. Well done.

The film has terrific humor, and reflects the curiously subjective reality of a teenager, but it never lets the audience completely off the hook, emotionally. I found myself smiling during the scene of Champagne visiting her mother in prison. She talks about how she got all her mannerisms and personality from her mom, and we see Champagne's mom sashaying away with one of the matrons. Then we watch as her daughter repeats the strut. It's an endearing, ingratiating scene, wonderfully realized through character animation- then we realize, "Hey, we're in PRISON here!" and the surreal nature of this girl's life becomes clear. 'Champagne' is about how incredibly resilient children are; how they can survive anything, anything at all, provided they have hope that things will someday improve.

I can't imagine this film being any better. It's exactly as long as it needs to be. Its style is well matched to its story. The voice performance is honest, engaging, and heartfelt. But the film's astonishing graphic appointments- in cutting, in camera movement, in the use and placement of characters in the frame, and in the subtle use of color for emotional effect- makes it a masterpiece in a class by itself. Where is this girl today, Michael?

This is the kind of film many people in ASIFA might someday aspire to make themselves. I'm sure many of our friends will go on to work for Disney, for Pixar, for Blue Sky, or for any number of video game companies. Well, that's a great way to make a living, and those big budget films sure are great fun to look at and to enjoy. But all the elements of great filmmaking are present in the independent films of Michael Sporn, and in the works of others like him, who are quietly going about the business of doing what they love. Lately we've all been dazzled (and perhaps a little intimidated) by the state of the art in animated films. I suggest to my fellow artists that "state of the art" isn't about the technical gloss a film possesses, but about the artist's ability to connect with an audience in a meaningful and evocative way. We can debate all we want as to the condition the industry is in, but as long as people are making animated movies like 'Champagne', we're doing okay, as far as I can see. "Pick the thing you do the best," my dad used to say to me, "and then do the best you can with it." Michael Sporn has been doing it for the past thirty years. Take a look at these films, and you'll see the kind of animation more people might attempt if they could only look above the intimidating marketing juggernaut that drives feature production.

Help Save Paper Tiger TV

A message from Mark Segall,
aNYmator editor, 1995-1998

Paper Tiger Television, a nonprofit media organization that I've been a member of for the past year is facing its worst economic crisis ever.

Since its founding by documentarian Dee Dee Halleck in 1981, PTTV has provided a lively alternative to network news. Paper Tiger documentaries and half-hour cable TV shows deconstruct mainstream print and broadcast journalism to expose reactionary, pro-corporate bias. The collective's ultimate goal is to help people shake off mass media influence and produce their own news. PTTV has involved thousands of youth and adults in the production of over 300 hundred social issue television shows; reached thousands more through media literacy workshops and grassroots screenings.

2003 has been a year of more awards, and festival invitations than ever. Unfortunately, it's also been a year of drastic funding cuts. Paper Tiger could be celebrating its 23rd anniversary by firing the two staffers who keep its office running day to day. Some birthday present!

To help prevent this:

- Make a donation, however modest, at *http://www.papertiger.org/donate*
- Send a check to Paper Tiger Television, 339 Lafayette Street New York, NY 10012

Though financial support is much needed, publicity, kind words and tape purchases are also much appreciated. To find out more, email Denisse Andrade or Jennifer Nedbalsky at *info@papertiger.org* or call (212) 420-9045.

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